NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-6132 SEPTEMBER 11, 1978
FRED BROWN/NEW DELHI

SAVING THE HIMALAYAN FOREST

ANNCR:

THIS YEAR'S UNPRECEDENTED MONSOON FLOODS IN INDIA HAVE FOCUSSED ATTENTION ON EFFORTS TO PRESERVE THE HIMALAYAN FOREST FROM UNWISE EXPLOITATION. FROM NEW DELHI, CORRESPONDENT FRED BROWN HAS A BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

THE CAMPAIGN TO SAVE THE HIMALAYAN FOREST IS NOT NEW. FOR YEARS, ECOLOGISTS AND ENVIRONMENTALISTS HAVE BEEN WARNING THAT THE INDISCRIMINATE CUTTING DOWN OF TREES IN THE HIMALAYAN FOOTHILLS COULD CHANGE THE ENTIRE COMPLEXION OF THE REGION, DESTROYING ITS VALUABLE FLORA AND FAUNA, CONVERTING THE ONCE RICHLY-FORESTED TRACT INTO A WASTELAND AND LEAVING NOTHING TO PREVENT THE EROSION THAT CLOGS RIVERS DOWNSTREAM AND CAUSES THEM TO SPILL OVER THEIR BANKS WHEN THE MONSOONS COME.

RECENT STUDIES CARRIED OUT BY AMERICAN METEOROGISTS ON GLOBAL WEATHER MODELS HAVE SHOWN THAT BUT FOR THE HIMALAYAN FOOTHILLS, MUCH OF NORTHERN INDIA WOULD HAVE BEEN AN EXTENSION OF THE RAJASTHAN DESERT. REMOVE THE HIMALAYAS, SAY THE EXPERTS, AND NORTHERN INDIA WOULD TURN ARID. PROTECTING THE MOUNTAINS AND THEIR VEGETATION, THEREFORE, HAS BECOME A CRITICAL CONSIDERATION.

A RECENT STUDY BY THE WORLD BANK PREDICTED THAT AT THE PRESENT RATE OF CUTTING, IN SIXTY YEARS, INDIA WILL HAVE NO FOREST LEFT AT ALL. AND THE HIMALAYAN CLUB, AN INTERNATIONAL BODY WITH GLOBAL MEMBERSHIP, WARNS THAT THE ENTIRE ECOLOGY AND COMPLEXION OF THE REGION IS IN DANGER.

WARNINGS SUCH AS THESE HAVE HAD A PROFOUND IMPACT IN INDIA. NUMEROUS STUDY SEMINARS HAVE BEEN HELD ON THE SUBJECT, AND THERE HAVE BEEN GROWING DEMANDS IN PARLIAMENT FOR MEASURES TO PREVENT DEFORESTATION. THE CAMPAIGN TO HALT INDISCRIMINATE FOREST CUTTING IS NOT CONFINED TO SCIENTISTS AND POLITICIANS. FOR NEARLY TEN YEARS NOW, MANY OF THE HILL-DWELLERS THEMSELVES HAVE JOINED IN A GRASS-ROOTS MOVEMENT CALLED "OPERATION CLING" -- THE MOVEMENT GETS THIS NAME FROM THE ACTION OF ITS MEMBERS INCLUDING WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN CLINGING BODILY TO TREES TO PREVENT THEM FROM BEING CUT DOWN.

MANY COLLEGE STUDENTS HAVE BEEN ATTRACTED TO THE MOVEMENT. UNLIKE FELLOW STUDENTS ELSEWHERE IN THE COUNTRY WHO HAVE BEEN DEMONSTRATING FOR REDUCED COLLEGE FEES, POSTPONMENT OF EXAMS AND BETTER HOSPITAL FACILITIES, THE STUDENTS OF THE HIMALAYAN BELT HAVE BEEN DEMANDING AN END TO THE EXPORT OF THEIR FOREST WEALTH TO THE PLAINS, FOR USE IN TURPENTINE, PLYWOOD, SPORTING GOODS AND PAPER PULP.

RECENTLY, OPERATION CLING SCORED ITS FIRST SMALL VICTORY. AN ANNOUNCEMENT BY THE STATE GOVERNMENT IN UTTAR PRADESH THAT THE PRESENT SYSTEM OF FOREST EXPLOITATION BY CONTRACTORS WILL BE ENDED IN THREE YEARS, AND SCIENTIFIC CONTROL MEASURES INTRODUCED. SUPPORTERS OF OPERATION CLING HOPE THE EXPERIENCE OF THIS YEAR'S DISASTROUS FLOODS WILL SPUR STATE AND NATIONAL LEGISLATURES TO TAKE EVEN MORE DRASTIC ACTION.

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